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Factors influencing the academic major selection of undecided students: A phenomenological study

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Factors Influencing the Academic Major Selection of

Undecided Students: A Phenomenological Study

(TITLE)

BY

Christina D. Thompson

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF

Master of Science in College Student Affairs

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS


May 2009

YEAR


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Factors Influencing the Academic Major Selection of

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May 4, 2009

ABSTRACT

This phenomenological, qualitative research study was designed to determine the most commonly selected academic major chosen by previously undecided students, the various factors that influenced the academic-major decision, and the similarities between the study participants. By comparing a Fall 2006 spreadsheet of undecided freshmen enrolled at Eastern Illinois University to a Fall 2008 spreadsheet of Eastern Illinois University students, the major choice of these previously undecided students was Communication Studies, determined to be the most highly selected academic major. Previously undecided students who had chosen Communication Studies were recruited for participation in this research. Data was collected through a demographic questionnaire and one-on-one audio-recorded interviews. Analysis of the data indicated that students were influenced to choose their academic major by family, professors, advisors, career advisors, careers, career details, and personal interest in the major. It was determined that many similarities existed between the participants including family influence in decision-making, favorite high school subject, type of extra curricular activity, creation of college friendships, Career Service influence in major choice, and monetary influence on academic major. In addition, all students were still unsure with regard to career decision.

DEDICATION

Dedicated to my family, for continuously encouraging me and having faith that I would succeed, even when I felt like I had hit some serious road blocks.

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I would like to acknowledge the contributions of a few very helpful individuals in the completion of this thesis....BEFORE GRADUATION!

To a fantastic thesis committee:

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

As a student graduates from high school and decides to embark into a new life called college, there are many decisions that need to be made beyond the decision to attend college. After making the decision to continue their education, an undergraduate must then decide when, where and how they will proceed (Astin, 1993). The reasons for choosing a specific school are many and varied. Holley (1975) found that any number of the following may have great influence on an undergraduate choosing Eastern Illinois University: family connections, athletic prestige, size, cost, personal impressions, geographical proximity, high scholastic standards in general or influence of classmates to name a few. Corley (1991) recognized “economic, social and academic reasons” for choosing a specific college (p. 19).

With their futures at stake, it is no wonder that so many undergraduates stress over making the right decision about college and their academic major. Students want to make sure that what they are putting into college will pay off in the end (Astin, 1993) or if a college degree is not necessary, to produce the career results that the individual desires. Hecker (1996) found that most high school students express an interest in college for the primary purpose of earning more money. With the formation of this assumption, it becomes necessary for an undergraduate to begin understanding the importance of choosing an academic major and career. During the 1950’s and 1960’s, “A degree essentially entitled a graduate, regardless of major, to a good job and a ticket into the elite society” (Peterson, 2006, p. 20). By the 1970’s there was a change in this need, and employers began recruiting specific academic majors who had more-specialized

knowledge (Peterson, 2006). Employers have become accustomed to recruiting undergraduates with specialized education. This forced undergraduates to learn more about the economy, to determine what specific careers would be most available and to assist in their academic major decision-making process to secure their futures (Peterson, 2006). Even with the knowledge of career trends and options for academic majors, a large number of undergraduates are still enrolling in college as “undecided” (Hawkins, Bradley, & White, 1977). Gordon (1995) attributes this to “the chicken and egg question of not knowing which to select first – a career field or college major” (p. ix)

The choice of an academic major is one of the most defining attributes of an undergraduate once they are enrolled in an institution of higher education. Often, undergraduates are assigned to academic advisors, paired with roommates, and placed into courses according to their declared majors. This allows them to be surrounded by peers with similar interests and goals. The exception to this is when a student enrolls in college without claiming an academic major and is therefore labeled “undecided.” Gordon (1995) claims that the population of undecided students is extremely diverse; therefore each student’s needs vary greatly. These undecided students may also have some similar characteristics contributing to this indecision (Gordon, 1981).

Purpose of the Study

This study is designed to discover the major selection of undergraduates who begin college categorized as “undecided” with reference to their academic major. By reviewing a list of registered undecided undergraduates for the Fall 2006 school year and comparing it to the Fall 2008 school year, previously undecided undergraduates will be identified with regard to their majors. The goal of this study was to determine what

factors were involved in choosing this identified major and if there are any commonalities or differences between these students in why they chose this particular major.

Research has shown that many factors may influence the choice of major, therefore questions regarding the study participants' demographics, family demographics and education, the use of personality/interest/value inventories, high school educational experiences, extracurricular activities, and leadership experiences, influences on major choice, the major decision making process and choice of career were asked. If we can determine what major is predominantly chosen and the reason in which the major was chosen, we may be able to make some changes in the way that we advise students in order to better provide for undecided students.

Research Questions

Our society promotes all people as individuals, meaning that no two people are the same. This may hold true for how students choose their majors as well. Guerra and Braungart-Rieker (1999) suggest that "students who are still experiencing career indecision but who are forced to choose a major may gravitate toward certain majors" (p. 264). This idea led me to my research questions.

- What is the most common academic major selected by previously undecided students?
- What factors influenced the academic major choice of previously undecided students having selected this most commonly chosen academic major?
- What are the similarities and differences among previously undecided students having selected this most commonly chosen academic major?

- Upon choosing this major, did the student choose a career as well?

Significance of the Study

Undecided students or students who end up changing their major during their educational process “represent the majority at some institutions,” so understanding why these students are undecided and the factors contributing to the selection of their academic major will greatly assist colleges in retaining these students (Peterson, 2006, p. 2). Leppel (2001) found that undecided students were less likely to be persistent in college and were more likely to do poorly in their courses than those students who had claimed a specific major. Carver (1982) discussed the relationship between career/academic major decidedness on students’ academic performance. Knowing that academic decidedness may contribute to a student’s persistence emphasizes the need to learn how to facilitate undecided students’ academic major decision-making process. Without knowing what resources need to be offered to assist undecided students with their academic needs, retention of these students will suffer.

Retaining students is important to universities. If the majority of students are undecided when they enter college, they are less likely to stay in school and could represent a loss for the college or university. Graunke and Woosley (2005) noted that if a student does not have good experiences at a college or positive interactions with faculty and peers, then they may not be as committed to the university and will consequently leave prematurely. An incomplete college education will also be a loss for the student. Jurgens (2000) found that undecided students receiving career counseling increased their ability to make decisions and were less likely to suffer from indecision with regard to academic major or career. Those students who went on to be successful due to

contributions made by college professors, career counselors or experiences gained while in college are probably going to be more likely to give money back to the institution (Peterson, 2006). Cohen (1998) stated that “Colleges are always short of money,” so it is important to provide the best services to students to ensure that the money will keep coming (p. 390).

College is a time to help students through the confusion of higher education and assist them in becoming confident adults. This is the best preparation that we can give them when they graduate from our institution (Horsman, 1996). As Whiston (2003) said, “Only sleep takes more of people’s time than work” (p. 37). If we look at the importance of the academic major decision in that perspective, it seems necessary to try to improve the student’s future by assisting them in finding a major, and therefore a career, that will provide the student with a fulfilled life. By looking at the outcomes, and talking with previously undecided students, we may be able to begin to understand the undecided student, which will provide the student and institution with greater success.

Limitations of the Study

Similar to any research study, there will be limitations. The researcher will be limiting participants to include only undergraduates enrolled at Eastern Illinois University, which will result in limited generalizability of the results. As the researcher will randomly select a limited number of undecided students, representing the most frequently chosen academic major among previously undecided students, the findings may not represent the overall population of previously undecided students. By choosing students randomly, race, ethnicity or gender has not been accounted for in relation to

major choice. By conducting face-to-face interviews, there is also a possibility that the interviewer may unknowingly influence the students' responses.

Definition of Terms

Throughout the literature, researchers have used many definitions for undecided and indecisive students; with the similarities being that neither has chosen an academic major or career. Indecisive students "have personal qualities that will not allow them to reach a decisional state of mind and take a course of action" (Salomone, 1982, p. 497) and have been found to need more personal and career counseling. These types of students are, for one reason or another, completely unable to make the academic major decision (Guay, Senecal, Gauthier, & Fernet, 2003).

Likewise, Heppner and Hendricks (1995) found that "the undecided client did not seem to have debilitating personality characteristics (e.g., anxiety, individuation) that inhibited receiving information from the counselor" (p. 431). Very simply, undecided students are defined as those students who are just simply undeclared with regard to academic major and who are unsure of their career goals (Carver, 1982). Carver's definition of the undecided student will be used in this study.

Summary

Undecided students are a growing trend in American institutions of higher education. Because a strong relationship exists between academic decisiveness and retention, faculty, staff and administrators are becoming more interested in how to address the needs of these undecided students. Before institutions can provide the appropriate resources, they need to understand the concerns and factors influencing these undecided students. This research study will determine what major was most commonly

chosen by previously undecided students and the various factors that may have played a role in this final decision. In addition, the researcher is interested in finding out if upon choosing an academic major, one has also predetermined a career.

CHAPTER II

Literature Review

In the following section, the changes in education through the years and the establishment of the academic major will be discussed. The influences that have been found to contribute to an undergraduate's choice of academic major and career choice will be acknowledged and the type of relationship that may exist between career choice and choice of academic major will be reviewed. Previous research on undecided students will also be examined.

The Academic Major

Prior to the United States' higher education curricular transformation beginning in the 1870's, every student received the same general education (Peterson, 2006). The early curriculum had been based in such disciplines as Greek and Latin literature, history, divinity and math (Cohen, 1998). As higher education continued to grow, it became apparent that things would have to change in order to adapt to the changing trends. This led to the development of the university system in the late 1800s, which varied from the previous college system in the following ways: it was less involved with religion, became a more professional environment, worked more closely to prepare individuals for society needs, worked more directly with the treasury to provide funding, and offered more advanced and specific education in the science fields as opposed to the humanities (Cohen, 1998).

Within this same period and continuing into the 1900s, United States higher education saw the development of two trends found in higher education today: electives and the undergraduate major (Peterson, 2006). Electives were originally established as a

way to generate differences in students, since all students have different fortes, skill levels, interests, and career goals (Lucas, 1994). Because the elective courses grew so quickly, the education system became disorganized with students studying a variety of different subjects at once. This random combination of courses led the students to have a more varied education, but the education lacked coherence. At that point a student could earn a degree by completing one hundred and twenty hours of courses in whatever disciplines that the student chose (Cohen, 1998). In order to re-establish a more organized system, the academic major was established (Peterson, 2006).

The idea of selecting an academic major was considered the compromise between the earlier structured system and the random elective system (Lucas, 1994) and was established on campuses nationwide by 1910 (Peterson, 2006). Each student chose a concentration (major) to occupy most of their credit hours, and they chose electives from the arts, sciences, or humanities to fill the other needed course hours (Lucas, 1994). One of the goals in the development of a United States university system was to prepare students for the needed careers in society resulting in many new academic majors by the 1960's (Peterson, 2006). As society's needs changed and the job market fluctuated depending on the economy, certain majors became more highly sought than others (Cebula & Lopes, 1982). Peterson (2006) found that, "Reviewing the choices of students in the past 30 years, it is apparent that there have been clear winners and losers among undergraduate majors" (p. 21).

Influences on Major Choice

Similar to choosing a college, a student must also determine what academic major they wish to pursue. "Choosing a college major represents a major life decision – a

decision that research has shown to be the most frequently identified life regret for Americans” (Beggs, Bantham, & Taylor, 2008, p. 381). Choosing the appropriate plan of study is not just a decision, but often it is highlighted as an investment in the future, as students are relying more and more on student loans and credit cards (Thomas, 2000). It is no wonder that one interest of researchers is to determine why students choose certain majors. Research studies have produced many different factors that have influenced the choice of an academic major. Those factors included: advisors or professors (Corley, 1991; Wilson, Gaff, Dienst, Wood, & Bavry, 1975), family (Simpson, 2003; Horsman, 1996), socialization (Davies & Guppy, 1997), gender roles (Baumgardner, 1976; Ware & Lee, 1988), careers options (Hecker, 1996; Gordon, 1995), salary (Cebula & Lopes, 1982; Hecker, 1996), and general interest in the subject or program (Corley, 1991; Leppel, 2001).

Influence of People

The first factor that was found to contribute to an undergraduate’s decision of an academic major was the guidance of individuals in their lives. With daily life filled with professors, peers, and family, students may feel the pressure or be suggested to pursue certain academic majors. Corley (1991) found that department advisors and professors were often used for collecting more information regarding majors. Wilson, Gaff, Dienst, Wood, and Bavry (1975) reported that faculty interested students in their field and assisted students in their choice of academic major. If a student has the opportunity to meet with faculty or staff, then this would apply. However, this opportunity may not arise until later into a student’s education when most major courses are offered. One must also consider the results of Ware and Lee (1988), who found that women could be influenced

to choose more science or math-based majors (even though studies suggest that they are less likely to pursue these fields) if career counselors or teachers encouraged this pursuit.

When a student is in elementary school and/or high school, they often see their parents as their hero and will strive to follow in their foot steps. Simpson (2003) found that mothers had a strong influence in the major choice of college students, specifically “encouraging students to pursue careers in such non-technical fields as business and public service” (p. 453). Horsman (1996) also concluded that in the College of Science and the College of Education and Professional Studies, students were most influenced in their choice of major by their mothers or stepmothers.

Societal Norms

Another factor that was found to contribute to the selection of an academic major was societal norms. Like everything else in the American society, students may have developed some assumptions of certain academic majors. For instance, Davies and Guppy found “the professional faculties, engineering and business, are typically much more prestigious and powerful than the humanities or social sciences” (1997, p. 1419). Dawson-Threat and Huba (1996) found that most students chose academic majors where they were part of the majority with regard to gender. Specifically, males avoided fields such as nursing and education as these fields were considered to be more nurturing in nature and were usually female-dominated majors (Davies & Guppy, 1997). Simpson (2003) found similar results as men chose the science-based majors while women chose the social services majors. Women were not focusing on these science-based majors due to the “high priority upon their future family and personal lives” (Ware and Lee, 1988, p. 604). Baumgardner (1976) suggested that it was all about the way the student thought and

that this thought process was what may be influenced by gender and year in school. It was even found that “seniors tended to cluster in majors that are traditional for their gender group” (Dawson-Threat & Huba, 1996, pp. 6).

Career Choice

A third factor found to contribute to the choice of an academic major was the undergraduate’s career goals. When researching academic majors, it is important to understand that research often separates academic majors into two categories: “vocationally oriented” or “pre-professional.”, or non-pre-professional (Peterson, 2006, p. 7). Hecker (1996) found a “direct relationship between the field and the occupations its graduates pursue” (p. 13). Some of these pre-professional or vocationally oriented majors include the areas of: medicine, computer science, accounting and engineering. Gordon (1995) suggested that students, whose biggest issue is whether to decide on a major or career first, would “solve this dilemma by choosing an area in which the major and occupation are obviously and directly related” (p. ix). The other type of major is not as specific and does not prepare the undergraduate student for one specific career choice. Some examples of these more general majors include: psychology, sociology, economics and history (Hecker, 1996).

Career Details

Aside from the career itself, another factor found to contribute to the choice of academic major by undergraduates was the details of a potential job. Some job characteristics included “financial aspects of the job, autonomy or occupational prestige” (Beggs, Bantham, & Taylor, 2008, p. 382). Cebula and Lopes (1982) found that undergraduates might take fringe benefits or growth possibility into consideration when

deciding on an academic major. It should come as no surprise that some “students will shift to disciplines where salaries are high” (Cebula & Lopes, 1982, p. 311). Specifically, Davies and Guppy (1997) found that “women place less emphasis on monetary return when selecting a field” (p. 1422). This may be the sole reason that “earnings of men were higher than earnings of women for nearly all career fields” (Hecker, 1996, p. 11).

General Interest

Another factor found to contribute to an undergraduate’s choice of academic major was their general interest in the program and/or subject material. Corley (1991) noted that students selected a major because they had a “personal interest in the program” (p. 126). Similarly, Leppel (2001) found that students chose non-pre-professional majors due to a general interest in the subject, and not necessarily for the career that it may lead the student to pursue. With most college curriculums including general education courses, student may be attracted to an academic major after enrolling in a general education course. This was noted in Horsman (1996) when participants ranked personal enjoyment of the major as a key factor of why it was chosen.

Students may gain interest in an academic major through marketing strategies of an institution and performing Internet searches to search their major options. (Beggs, Bantham, & Taylor, 2008). Peterson (2006) made similar findings regarding the importance of a school’s marketing devices in influencing students. Corley (1991) found that undergraduates rely very heavily on the college catalog when gathering information about potential academic majors. Brochures and flyers can also give students a better understanding of academic major options (Corley, 1991).

Undecided Students

The following section will discuss undecided undergraduate students. Gordon (1995) reported, “The research on undecided students is voluminous” and “continuous over seventy years” (p. 3). The reasons for being undecided, characteristics of undecided students, and suggestions for how to assist undecided students with their academic major decision-making will be reviewed.

“There is an abundance of literature concerning college-age youths who are unready, unwilling, or unable to commit themselves to occupational or educational decisions after graduating high school” (Gordon, 1981, p. 433). With more than 70 years of studying “educationally and vocationally undecided-undeclared college students”, it is no wonder that there is so much literature dedicated to this population of students (Jurgens, 2000, p. 237). The majority of previous research focused on models dedicated to helping undecided students make a decision regarding their academic major. Specifically the research has focused on the development of resources that career counselors and advisors should use when handling students who are unclear of their major or career. Heppner and Hendricks (1995) discussed the counseling methods of undecided students and noted that undecided students were helped greatly through “short-term, information-based counseling” (p. 431).

Beyond the issues facing college students, it is important to know who the undecided students are and if there are any recurring themes before one can determine how to assist them with this decision-making process. For instance, Guay et al. (2003) found that a student’s relationship with their parents could have an impact on their ability to make decisions. Specifically it was found that if parents and peers were supportive,

then students were more confident about making decisions independently (Guay et al., (2003). Guerra and Braungart-Rieker (1999) had similar findings and suggested that the more overprotective mothers were, the more likely a student would suffer from career indecision.

Guerra et al. (1999) pointed out that choosing a major can be a challenging decision, because one is not only choosing a curriculum for the next few years, but is also giving “direction to career selection after graduation” (p. 255). Guerra et al. (1999) suggested that the indecision was fear of choosing the wrong career. Hawkins, Bradley, and White (1977) found that anxiety (general, major choice, and vocational choice) was a factor weighing into this career-decision or lack of career-decision. Students who seemed to be anxious would be less likely to gather any information that would be helpful in making this decision, as more information will only create more anxiety (Hawkins et al., 1977). Other factors influencing the ability to make a decision were a student’s agreeableness and organization. Lounsbury, Tatum, Chambers, Owens and Gibson (1999) found that students who were organized and agreeable would be more likely to actively engage in career planning and were more likely to ask experts or professionals for assistance.

Salomone (1982) compiled a list of potential reasons why students were undecided. Some of these reasons were, “Students may recognize that they need more information about various occupations, job demands, educational requirements and so on”, “that there is need for information about how to decide on a vocational choice”, “students may have uncertainty about one’s vocational aspirations and goals”, or “students may be uncertain about the economic practicality of a long considered

vocational goal” (Salomone, 1982, p. 497). Gordon (1995) similarly identified three issues of students who remain undecided: lack of information about oneself, lack of information about academic areas and lack of information about occupational choices. A lack of information often will cause anxiety and impede any decision-making process. In order to counteract this lack of information, universities and even high schools should better educate their students on there academic major, career, and economic options.

Career Choice

Similar to the process of choosing an academic major, researchers have found many factors contributing to the choice of career by undergraduate students. In the following section, the researcher will review literature regarding identity assumptions (Bartley, 1998; Beggs, et al., 2008), ethnicity (Daire, LaMothe, & Fuller, 2007; Perrone, Sedlacek, & Alexander, 2001), gender (Duffy, & Sedlacek, 2007; Farber, 1996; Perrone et al., 2001; Tang, Pan, & Newmeyer, 2008), interests (Duffy et al., 2007), values (Judge & Bretz, 1992; Tang et al., 2008), academic department (Hearn, 1980), and parents (Schulenberg, Vondracek, & Crouter, 1984; Simpson, 2003).

Identity Assumptions

As students chose a career, it was not as simple as what do they want to do. Bartley (1998) noted, “A person’s occupation serves as one of the means of expressing his or her unique identity” (p. 1). In any formal setting, an introduction of oneself included a job title. Students often think about their choice of a major as the job that it will result in (Horsman, 1996). For instance, they chose a major because they did not want to deal with children everyday or they did not like a particular subject area (Beggs,

Bantham, & Taylor, 2008). Identity assumptions influenced the choice of a career positively and negatively.

Demographics

Career choice was found to be influenced by ethnicity and gender. Daire, LaMothe, & Fuller (2007) found that African Americans are more likely than Caucasian Americans to consider income and status when deciding on a career. Perrone, Sedlacek, and Alexander (2001) reported similar findings of the value of salary in African Americans choosing certain careers. Perrone et al. (2001) discovered that African Americans may be less likely to pursue certain careers due to the finances needed to proceed through the educational system. This suggested that ethnicity may contribute to the ideas of what is important in the choice of a career.

Gender influenced career choice as women tended to value careers where they were able to work with people or make a difference in society (Duffy & Sedlacek, 2007). Tang, Pan, and Newmeyer (2008) found that high school females were more interested in the helping careers where high school males were more interested in data and things. Along similar lines, a woman's career path was more complex due to the fact that she factored a family into her decision-making and career development (Farber, 1996). Career goals and barriers to obtain these career goals were found to differ between males and females as reported by Perrone et al. (2001). They found that men strived for high salaries and intrinsic values where women agreed with the intrinsic values, but cared more about the prestige of the career versus the monetary reward (Perrone et al., 2001). To obtain their career goals, men struggled with time management, while women had issues finding the money to pursue career goals (Perrone et al., 2001).

Interests/Values

Duffy and Sedlacek (2007) studied the relationship between career choice and personal interests and values. They found that students pursued careers where they had similar personal interests and values. Judge and Bretz, Jr. (1992) found that work values, such as the chance to help society, help needy families, or provide for one's own family influenced the pursuit of a specific career. Similarly, Tang, Pan, and Newmeyer (2008) concluded that undergraduates let outcome expectations, such as self-worth, fame or being able to support the family financially, sway their academic major decision-making process.

Influence of People

Hearn (1980) found that undergraduate students learned the most about career options through their academic major departments and thus it was important for each department to be knowledgeable about available careers paths for their academic major. It was also found that parents had many opportunities to assist their undergraduate children in learning about the various vocations/careers that are available to them (Schulenberg, Vondracek, and Crouter, 1984). Parents encouraged students to pursue academic majors that will result in a job upon graduation (Simpson, 2003). Peterson (2006) recommended that every academic department have an introductory class to educate students on the academic major as well as potential career outcomes. Passing on correct information was beneficial to the students' decision-making process.

Summary

The literature reviewed provided a clear definition of an undecided student: any student who has not declared an undergraduate academic major (Carver, 1982). Many

studies identified factors influencing an undergraduate academic major choice: advisor or professors, family, socialization, gender roles, career options, salary and other career benefits, and a student's personal interest in the program. Researchers also found several similar factors involved in the career choice process: identity assumptions, ethnicity, gender, interests, values, academic department, and parents.

CHAPTER III

Methodology

This study was designed to identify the major selection of previously undecided students and to understand the factors that contributed to this decision-making process. Past literature has shown that there were many factors that could contribute to the choice of an academic major. This chapter focused on the design of the study, research questions, setting, selection of participants, interview protocol, data collection, treatment of data, and data analysis.

Design of the Study

The research design used for determining the outcomes of previously undecided students for this study was qualitative. By utilizing a qualitative design and phenomenological approach, experiential information from a small population was gathered. A qualitative design was used based on the qualitative inquiry that “the world is not stable” (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, & Sorensen, 2006, p. 452). Because any multitude of factors can contribute to a decision, it was impossible to measure them without taking into consideration other factors as well (Ary, et al., 2006). The phenomenological approach allowed individuals to explain their own experiences in detail (Ary et al., 2006). With the less-structured, phenomenological approach, participants had more freedom to include their own feelings and thoughts on why something happened (Ary et al., 2006). This approach allowed participants who had a specific experience to tell their story and feelings about the event (Ary et al., 2006). Finally this design and approach was used because information needed to be gathered from a specific sample of individuals (Ary et al., 2006).

Research Questions

A phenomenological approach was used for this study to enable undergraduates to explain their experiences of choosing their current academic major. With a semi-structured interview, students were allowed to expand on their feelings and thoughts of this process. This study was designed to obtain information to answer the following questions:

- What was the most common academic major selected by previously undecided students?
- What factors influenced the academic major choice of previously undecided students having selected this most commonly chosen academic major?
- What are the similarities and differences among previously undecided students having selected this most commonly chosen academic major?
- Upon choosing this major, did the student choose a career as well?

Setting

Campus

This study was conducted at Eastern Illinois University. Eastern Illinois University, a midwestern regional comprehensive university, enrolled just over twelve thousand students in Fall 2008. Two thousand of those students were graduate students. The complete list of Eastern Illinois University's 44 undergraduate academic majors can be found in Appendix A.

Interview Site

Interviews were conducted in one of Eastern Illinois University's Career Services interview rooms. The site was chosen for its convenience to all students and the

researcher and because the room was compatible for audio-recording the interviews.

Students were given the opportunity to change location upon receipt of the confirmation email if for some reason they were not comfortable with the arrangements.

Selection of Participants

This study was designed to discover the academic major that was most commonly chosen by previously undecided students and the factors that contributed to this decision. Two spreadsheets were used to determine appropriate candidates; the participants must have been listed as “undecided” as a freshman in Fall 2006 and must have declared a major by Fall 2008. Upon comparing these two spreadsheets, calculations were made to determine which major had been most commonly chosen by these individuals. The data collected showed that in the Fall 2006, 788 freshmen students were listed as undecided. Using this same list and locating these individuals in a spreadsheet of Fall 2008 students, it was discovered that only 536 of these students were still currently enrolled at Eastern Illinois University. Of those 536 students, all but eighteen had since declared an academic major. The five top chosen majors by these previously undecided students were Communication Studies (59), Family & Consumer Science (58), Elementary Education (49), Physical Education (43) and Psychology (33). A full list of the majors chosen by these undecided students can be found in Appendix B.

From the Fall 2008 spreadsheet, students having chosen Communication Studies were identified. An email (Appendix C) was sent to all previously undecided students who had declared Communication Studies as their academic major. In the email, the students were invited to participate in a research study that would request no more than one hour of their time and would be a one-on-one, face-to-face interview. If

undergraduates were interested in participating in this research, they were given the researcher's contact information and asked to respond. Only the first five responders would be asked to participate and receive a Wal-Mart gift card.

The researcher received email responses back from six of the 59 potential participants. Follow-up emails (Appendix D) were sent to all students who had responded to the original email. In this email, students were asked to identify dates and times that would work best for a 30-45 minute interview in the upcoming week. Six students responded and interviews were scheduled to accommodate the researcher and students' schedules. It was determined that the first interview scheduled would serve as the pilot interview. After arranging and completing all interviews, it was brought to the researcher's attention that one of the responding students had since changed to a Psychology major and therefore no longer met the needed qualifications for the study. The other five responding students did indeed meet all the necessary qualifications.

Interview Protocol

Eastern Illinois University students who had been undecided freshmen in the Fall 2006 and had declared Communication Studies as of Fall 2008 were asked to participate in a qualitative research study to determine what factors had influenced this choice of major. After the study participants had been identified, student interviews were arranged.

As all data was collected from human subjects, approval was asked for and granted by Eastern Illinois University's Institutional Review Board ensuring that the methodology was in accordance with the guidelines of this type of research.

Upon arrival for the interview, each participant was given an informed consent form (Appendix E), which explained the questions that were covered in the interview and

ensured that the undergraduate student realized that they could withdraw from the study at any time. The informed consent outlined the data collection and analysis process and addressed the confidentiality of all gathered data. If questions existed, students were given the opportunity to ask them at this time. After reviewing the informed consent and agreeing to the terms, students signed and dated the form and were provided a copy for their own records.

Upon completion of the informed consent, students were given a survey of demographic questions (Appendix F) to answer while the researcher made a photocopy of the informed consent for students to keep for their own records. The demographic questions addressed: ethnicity, gender, age, high school education, family construct, and family education and career.

When all demographic questions had been answered, the audio-recorded interview began. A list of pre-constructed interview questions (Appendix G) was used to ensure students would address certain potential influences. Interview questions included questions regarding family relationships, high school experiences, interest/abilities inventories, college experiences, major decision-making process, and career choice.

Data Collection

Data was collected through a demographic questionnaire and through face-to-face, one-on-one, audio recorded interviews, which were transcribed at a later date. The interviews were audio-recorded so the researcher could pay closer attention to the student during the interview and to ensure that all information was accurate.

The first interview conducted served as the pilot to determine if any questions needed to be revised to elicit different responses from the students. Upon completion of

this first interview, it was determined that no adaptations of the interview questions would be made for the future interviews. It was decided, that in addition to the interview questions, students would be asked to expand on some of the questions asked in the survey to elicit more comprehensive answers.

Treatment of Data

Any information gathered from the spreadsheets of student information, interviews, demographic sheets, and informed consent documents will be stored in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's home for a period of three years. All original information and audiotapes will only be accessible by the researcher. When reproducing any information gathered from the data collection process, no names or distinguishing comments will be used. Any personal information that identified the participant will be removed.

Data Analysis

Each interview was transcribed and then evaluated to find similarities and differences between all student interviews. Common themes were identified, discussed and compared to previous literature using a constant comparative method of evaluation. Data collected through the surveys was summarized for each participant using a pseudonym.

Summary

This study was designed to discover the academic major most commonly chosen by previously undecided students and the factors that contributed to this decision. A qualitative design, using a phenomenological approach, was used to allow individuals to explain their experiences in detail. Demographic data was collected using a survey and

was analyzed using descriptive statistics. Transcripts of the interviews were analyzed to identify common themes.

CHAPTER IV

Results

This chapter summarizes the results from the demographic questionnaire and the interview protocol. The qualitative collection process used in this study allowed the participants to recall their academic major decision-making process and provide the researcher with the information needed to answer the research questions. Findings were summarized around the research questions:

- What was the most common academic major selected by previously undecided students?
- What factors influenced the academic major choice of previously undecided students having selected this most commonly chosen academic major?
- What are the similarities and differences among previously undecided students having selected this most commonly chosen academic major?
- Upon choosing this academic major, did the student choose a career as well?

Demographics/Survey Responses

Four students were selected to participate in this study. In order to maintain confidentiality and to maintain consistency through this section, each student was given a pseudonym. Participant 1 was referred to as Cindy, Participant 2 was referred to as Sue, Participant 3 was referred to as Molly, and Participant 4 was referred to as Jill. All four of the participants in this study were female, three were twenty-one years old, and one was twenty-two years old. All four students were white/non-Hispanic.

All students attended high schools with different student populations. One student graduated with forty-three students, while another student graduated with around seven

hundred students in her graduating class. Two students graduated with somewhere between three hundred and four hundred students in their graduating class. All students reported having a guidance counselor in their high school, with three students reporting that they used their guidance counselor minimally, while one student met with the guidance counselor every two to three weeks.

All students reported having siblings, with two students only having one older sibling. The other two students had between three to four siblings, and were considered to be one of the middle children with regard to age. Two students reported living with both of their parents through high school, with one of these students' parents divorcing her senior year of high school. The other two students lived with their mother only.

All four of the students' mothers had received at least an associate's degree with three students' mothers having received at least a master's degree. Three of the participant's mothers were currently employed in the field of education; including special education, pre-school education, and physical education. Three students' fathers had received a college education: one receiving a bachelor's, one receiving an associate's and the other receiving a master's degree. The fathers' careers represented three very different fields including; real estate, custodial work, and computer/technology programming. The other father was currently unemployed.

What was the most common major selected by previously undecided students?

The population of freshmen students at Eastern Illinois University who were undecided with regard to academic major in the Fall 2006 was compared to a list of students in the Fall 2008 to determine the most highly selected major of these previously undecided students. There were 788 freshmen undecided students in Fall 2006. By Fall

2008, 536 of these students had selected an academic major and were still enrolled at Eastern Illinois University. Of these remaining students, eighteen still remained undecided. The most commonly chosen major of these previously undecided students was found to be Communication Studies with 59 students declaring this major (See Appendix B for distribution of academic major selection).

What factors influenced the academic major choice of previously undecided students?

Throughout the one-on-one, face-to-face interviews, students were asked four questions addressing possible influences on the choice of their academic major as Communication Studies. This section addresses their responses to these questions.

Family Member Major Influence

When asked specifically about family member influence in the choice of an academic major, two students mentioned influence from a particular family member. Sue answered with, “my sister I guess. She was in the same field, but different concentration.” Molly also felt influenced by a family member and responded to this question saying, “Actually my aunt had some influence in it. She thought that I would be good for pharmaceutical sales” and decided “I couldn’t think of anything else.” The other two students reported that no family member had an influence in their academic major choice. Cindy denied any influence from family members in the choice of her major, stating that “Neither of my parents went straight to college.” Jill agreed with Cindy in saying that nobody influenced her choice of major either.

Decision-Making Process

Each student was asked to describe their decision-making process regarding their choice of an academic major. The question was asked as an open-ended question to allow

the researcher to hear all of the details. Two students, Cindy and Molly noted female family member influence in this academic major decision-making process. Two students, Sue and Jill agreed that Career Services assisted them in narrowing down their options by educating them on the various academic majors available at Eastern Illinois University. Both Cindy and Sue had ruled out other majors before selecting Communication Studies. Molly and Jill both knew they were interested in Communication Studies, but were unsure of their concentration area.

When talking about the academic major decision-making process, Cindy responded, "I'm not a science fan. I have no interest in doing something with the sciences. I just ruled out any other major and thought about what major I could be (have) that would have a broad category of job opportunities. And I like people usually so I decided public relations would be a better one to go with."

Sue answered, "Actually my mom threw a bunch of paperwork at me that she had gotten off line...and then went to Eastern's website. I always just steered clear of whatever my sister did." She reported a lack of information of options when deciding on her major stating, "I looked through stuff and I knew that I liked the communication department but I didn't know if I wanted to go PR or corporate so I talked with (career advisor) and she almost picked it for me. It was kind of awesome. She knew exactly what I wanted to do."

Jill responded, "First, I heard about career services, and then I heard (career advisor's) name and how good she is in directing and helping you, so she really kind of pinpointed certain things." She continued. "I wanted to go into communications, so she

(advisor) kind of broke it down for me. And then I just chose it and went with the classes.”

Molly responded, “well again, my aunt has always told me about how the pharmaceutical sales industry, so I started taking classes for Communications and Public Relations and picked up a Health Communication minor, but then my sister who worked at the NYU Medical Center told me that pharmaceutical sales was phasing out, but I decided that I already liked the courses, I love the teachers, so I just decided to keep going with the major.”

Biggest Influence (Person or Thing)

One of the last questions asked during the interview was if there was one thing or person that had influenced this choice the most. Three students mentioned family as key influences in selecting the major for various reasons. Three students reported that teachers or the advisors in the department contributed to the continual pursuit of Communication Studies as an academic major. They discussed how much they enjoyed the interaction with faculty in classes and how the faculty excitement and enthusiasm made their education that much better.

Various people were mentioned as influential in the academic major selection process. With regard to parents, Sue stated, “My mom, or (career advisor).” “She (my mom) did the research...but I’m glad she did, because I probably wouldn’t have graduated on time.” Cindy answered, “My parents always really wanted me to go to college.” Molly replied, “I think my parents and my sister had a big influence on college in general.” Cindy responded, “I think just myself. Major-wise I was on my own in deciding.”

Faculty and/or advisors were mentioned by three of the participants as influences in the academic major decision-making process. Cindy commented, "The teachers more than anything influenced my decision and how enthusiastic they are about the subject they're teaching. They're just really interesting." Molly replied, "Where my aunt influenced me to start communications, I think that it was mainly the professors that kept me there. Because they really engaged me in learning and I really enjoyed it." Jill reported that, "I would have to say my advisor. I had her for three classes and she is just so intelligent with the material, and loves it and made me want to pursue it more. So I think it's just the professors."

Best Attribute of Major

With each student being identified as a Communication Studies major, they were then asked what they liked best about their academic major. It was concluded that three students thought that the best thing about the Communication Studies major was the various options undergraduates had to focus upon and the variety of classes that were available with this major. Again, one student noted that the professors were the best things about the department. One student noted that it was the course setting that she liked best, specifically the discussion-based aspect when they sit in circles.

Cindy responded, "I just like how it just opens the door to multiple different kinds of jobs and I can pretty much go anywhere with it." She continued, "I just feel like I can do a lot with it... so I think that in the end it's the most helpful for where I want to go." The options available within the major seemed to be a key selling point with Molly as well. Molly responded, "I like that it's always changing, never the same. You can do a lot

in the field of communication and, well, I don't know about right now, but I think you can." Jill mentioned the various things that she could do with this major in the future.

The classes and professors in communication studies were mentioned as key selling points for the academic major. Sue replied, "I like my professors, to be completely honest. They are very interactive. A lot of our classes sit in circles...but it really is discussion-based and I like that aspect. A lot of the rhetoric classes are fun too, just because it's thinking outside of societal norms." Jill reported, "I have to say the interaction with people."

What are the similarities and differences among previously undecided students?

Decision-Making Freedom

All four students reported that they had some freedom in making their decision regarding an academic major, but that their parents contributed to their decision-making. For instance, Cindy referred to it as, "parents like to have the upper hand a lot growing up. I kind of did what I wanted anyways." Sue commented, "It was kind of half and half." Molly also reported, "It was fifty-fifty. My parents would push for things and guide me, but in the end I got to ultimately decide." One student did mention society pressure by stating, "We were encouraged to do our own thing, but by socialization...you kind of follow a path." Jill stated, "I was just forced to go to college. I knew that's what I had to do, but my major was up to me."

Favorite Occupation of the Family

Two of the students, Sue and Jill, reported teaching or education to be very prominent within their families with Sue calculating that at least eight people in her family were in education, not including any spouses of relatives. Jill also mentioned that

nursing was a top choice of occupation for both sides of her family. The other two students felt that their families did not seem to choose just one occupation. Cindy responded very simply, “No, they’re all over the place. There’s a wide array of jobs.” Molly even recognized, “I don’t know what any of them do.”

Required High School Classes

When asked about required classes taken in high school, all students struggled to remember their mandatory courses in high school. Courses mentioned by all students included only English and math. Three students mentioned foreign language and sciences as mandatory as well. Cindy mentioned that economics and psychology were required. Sue reported that she was required to take a keyboarding and an agriculture class too.

When asked which classes they liked the most, three students agreed that they enjoyed English, with Molly stating, “I enjoy writing and that was a big part of it.” Sue noted she “was always into literature. My mom was very heavily into reading.” Cindy responded that, “I always excelled in the writing classes, so those came easy to me, so I liked going to those.”

When asked why it was that they enjoyed or did not enjoy certain classes, two students reported that the teacher influenced how they felt about a certain class. Cindy commented specifically on a Psychology teacher saying, “He was just really enthusiastic about his teaching and so he made me enjoy the course even more.” Additionally, Jill stated, “Usually math teachers and science teachers just don’t know how to explain things.”

Elective High School Classes

Three students mentioned art classes as the primary option for electives in their high school and three had taken at least one art class. Again, students struggled to remember the various options for electives. Cindy stated, “We had a lot of courses that you had to take in order to graduate so there wasn’t enough time (for electives.)” Molly reported, “I don’t think there were many options now that I’m thinking about it.” Other courses mentioned included; psychology, sociology, adult living, photography, agriculture, choir, band, and industrial technology.

When asked which electives they had taken, it was found that Cindy took advantage of half days where she took college courses as electives the other half of the day her senior year. Sue opted to take choir and band. Molly also participated in choir. When asked why participants chose the electives that they did, each student had different reasons. Jill claimed that she chose her electives, “mainly because my friends took it.” Sue responded that she chose the art classes, because, “I excelled more in them.” Cindy responded, “I figured that they would be more interesting and I’m more of a hands-on type of person.”

Extracurricular Activities & Leadership roles

All students reported being involved in some extracurricular activities. Two students were involved in National Honor Society. Three students reported being in some form of performance organization including, poms, musicals, and show choirs.

Cindy participated in poms and National Honor Society. Sue mentioned being involved with the National Honor Society, Art Honor Society, Student Council, Spanish Club, Art Club, musicals, softball, volleyball, fall play and other drama productions. Sue

also reported being a class representative. Jill was highly involved with swim team and water polo. Molly chose to be more actively involved with the performance organizations including show choir and the cheerleading team.

When asked why they had chosen these particular extracurricular activities, many answers were given. Two students agreed that they enjoyed the community service or charity aspect of the organization. Cindy chose to participate in dance because, "I love dance. I've danced my entire life" and National Honor Society because, "We got to help people. I love helping people." Sue mentioned her involvement with the Student Council, "I like the charity aspect mostly." Sue recognized the best part of Spanish Club was, "We went on little field trips to plays that were in Spanish." Molly stated her favorite aspect of the choirs and cheerleading was, "the performance aspect." Jill mentioned that the water polo team "was like our own community."

Students were asked to report on any leadership roles that they had held in these organizations. Three students confirmed having held leadership positions in high school organizations. Sue held many leadership roles in various organizations, but indicated, "We didn't really do much with any of them." This suggested that the leadership roles did not have much responsibility attached to them. Molly claimed, "I took on leadership, but I didn't necessarily have a position." The idea of leadership was very different between each of the participants.

Guidance Counselor Meetings

All four students met with a guidance counselor at their high school. Two students did not find their guidance counselor to be useful at all. Specifically, Molly stated, "he was a terrible guidance counselor" for failure to send transcripts to college by the

deadline. Sue did not utilize the guidance counselor much because, "People who had trouble went to the guidance counselor." The other two students felt their guidance counselor was extremely helpful. Cindy reported, "She (guidance counselor) was a family friend. I could go to her about anything." Jill also had positive things to say, reporting "I would see them every two or three weeks."

When asked specifically what they talked about with their guidance counselor, three students mentioned meeting with them to discuss what high school courses to take. Cindy stated very frankly, "We mostly talked about courses" and gave no other mention of assistance provided by the guidance counselor. Molly mentioned that, "he would ask about my classes." In addition, Sue recalled, "Honestly, ACT was really the first time that I talked to her. They didn't really force anyone to go see her."

Interest/Abilities Inventories

Students were asked about previous experiences utilizing interest/abilities inventories, and three students were given an explanation of what these are in order to be sure they were answering correctly. Three of the students recall taking an interest/abilities inventory, with one student taking an interest/abilities inventory in high school and college, and the other two students taking an inventory in college. Two students recalled what the results of the interest/ability inventory had determined. Cindy remembered her results and said her interests indicated the following: "It wasn't any type of desk job. It was more stuff either outdoors or I think one said I should be a teacher." Sue also remembered, "I always came up with nurse, teacher, or something along the service aspect." When asked why she thought that was, she responded, "I've always been a

nurturer.” The other student knew that these inventories existed, but did not recall ever having completed an interest/abilities inventory.

High School Career Aspirations

Every student mentioned the desire to pursue education or become a teacher, but three students had already ruled out education before arriving to campus. Cindy said, “I remember in second grade, I wrote this whole big thing about how I wanted to move out to California and teach elementary school, so being a teacher has always been in the back of my mind and then more so in high school and now I want to work with the music industry.” Similarly, Molly had always wanted to be a choir teacher. Sue agreed with the response, “Teaching...I didn’t think much beyond it. I liked kids, but as soon as I realized that they’re germmy, I was out of that.” The final student also mentioned education, but had changed her mind by the end of high school, because, “I knew I couldn’t sit in a classroom everyday.” Other careers mentioned included: broadcasting, journalism, and pharmaceutical sales.

Academic Major Interest on ACT

Students were asked to recall taking the ACT and if they had marked a specific major of interest on the ACT form. Two students reported either not remembering or not noting any particular major on the ACT. Specifically, Sue responded, “I hate tests, so I don’t even know how many of the questions I marked correctly.” Jill remembered marking something related to advertising or business as they did not have a Communication option. Cindy assumed that, “I probably marked journalism, because that’s what I initially came here for.”

Academic Success in College

Students were asked about their feelings regarding their academic success potential when arriving on Eastern Illinois University's campus. All four students reported feeling confident that they could be academically successful upon arrival, but both Cindy and Molly had a slight reality check once school started. Molly remembered that, "I didn't have the discipline that I needed and then it took me a year and a half probably to really figure out how to be a student." Molly mentioned that her biggest problem was going to class, "I didn't want to go, so I didn't, and I didn't realize that you needed to." Cindy recalled, "I was admitted into the honors college my freshman year. I got on this high horse and thought I was really smart. Later on it proved that college is way more different than high school." Jill mentioned her only fear being, "the GPA standards for a lot of majors."

Friendships in College

All students were asked if they found making friends at Eastern Illinois University to be fairly easy. All students reported having no problems meeting people and making friends. Cindy reported, "I found it really easy. I had a roommate my freshman year who was just out there. She was just loud and friendly." Jill and Molly also responded similarly to the ease of meeting people on campus.

All four students mentioned meeting their current friends through residence hall living arrangements. When asked about joining activities upon arrival on campus, none of the students mentioned this as the way to meet new people. Jill intended to join the swim team, so she lived in the athletic residence hall and made friends with her roommate, a soccer player. Molly indicated that her best friends "were actually my roommates and my

next door neighbors.” Cindy noted that “freshmen year...they all lived in my dorm.” Sue had a slightly different situation, because her sister attended Eastern Illinois University and was a few years older. Through this situation, she met a lot of people before arriving at Eastern Illinois University. When asked about how she met her current friends, she had convinced her best friend from home to be her roommate. Sue mentioned meeting some of her current roommates through living experiences. When asked about commonalities of her group of friends’ majors, she responded, “I have friends in the (Communication Studies) department, but I wouldn’t say they’re chummy.”

Major Decision Time Frame

When asked about when the students had declared their Communication Studies major, all students answered somewhere between their sophomore and junior year. Sue had already taken a few communication courses before declaring her major, but didn’t officially choose Communication Studies as her major until her junior year. She was the only student to jump headfirst into the program before declaring the major. Cindy declared her major at the beginning of junior year, after she had transferred out for a year to pursue dental hygiene. She reported getting annoyed with school in the hopes of becoming a dental hygienist, but very quickly realized that she had made a mistake. Both Molly and Jill had already determined their academic major by the beginning of their sophomore year. Three students plan on graduating in spring 2010, with the exception of Jill who chose to double major in Public Relations and Corporate Communication. She plans to graduate one semester later.

On Campus Resources

When asked about the type of campus resources that the students used to assist in making their academic major selection, three students mentioned Career Services, with two students specifically mentioning their career advisor by name. Jill stated, "Career Services helped me tremendously in knowing what's happening with everything." Molly was the exception as she felt that she decided primarily on her own with some push from her aunt. Sue said, "I knew a few people in the Comm (Communication Studies) department so I talked to students, but nothing past Career Services and those people." Sue had also, "taken a couple of Comm (Communication Studies) classes just to test the waters my sophomore year."

Fees versus Future Monetary Receipt (salary)

All students were asked whether they took the academic major fees (extra student fees for specific academic major courses, including technology, lab fees, etc.) versus the end result of salary into consideration when choosing their academic major. All students reported not taking this into consideration in the least. Sue responded, "Not really...I pay with student loans so I knew it was going to be my cost, so I just had the goal that I wanted to be done in four years." The other three students answered this question simply and directly indicating no monetary influence in their academic major decision-making process.

"Settling" on a Major

Each participant was asked how they felt regarding the major that they had selected and if they had ever felt like they had "settled" on this choice. At this point, all four students seemed genuinely happy with their selection of a major with Jill reporting,

“I could not imagine doing anything else.” Molly stated, “I completely love it.” All four students seemed content with their major choice, but two of the students, Cindy and Sue, inferred that they had “settled” on a communication studies academic major. Sue responded, “The communication major is so broad and that’s what I liked about it.” Cindy agreed that “I guess the way I kind of went about it, yes, but in the end, no because I figured that would be the most suitable major for me and what I want to do later on.”

Upon choosing this major, did the student choose a career as well?

It was determined that none of the students had decided upon their ideal career at the time of the interview. They were still exploring their options, even though two students had originally designated a certain career as their goal for choosing Communication Studies as their academic major. Their ideas had since changed as more options were made aware to them. One student mentioned that her ultimate career decision depended on the economy.

When asked if a career had been decided upon choosing this academic major, Cindy responded, “Um...I don’t know. I have so many careers that I want to do. I think about it basically on a day-to-day basis.” Jill responded, “Actually no. I like the (academic major) overall, but I was really confused for awhile what career went with it.” Sue and Molly both had ideas of what they wanted to do when they chose the major, but have since realized that they may not pursue that career after all. Sue answered, “I did and who knows if I’ll end up in that.” She seemed to indicate that she was unaware of the various options for careers within this academic major. Likewise, Molly replied, “Yes, I mean, I did until I found out that that wasn’t a wise choice.” She has since been told that pharmaceutical sales was a career that was slowly disappearing.

Summary

All four participating students were white/Caucasian females between the ages of 21-22. Students came from very different size graduating classes with two students coming graduating with 300-400 students, one graduating with 700+ students, and the other graduating with less than 50. Each student mentioned meeting with a guidance counselor in high school, with one student meeting frequently with her counselor. All students had at least one older sibling, with two students being one of the middle children in a family with three to four siblings. All students reported living with their mother, with two students living with both parents. All mothers had received a college education, with three having received at least a master's degree. Three mothers were currently employed in education. Three fathers had received college education, but careers varied greatly.

After tracking all undecided freshmen of Fall 2006 to Fall 2008 through spreadsheets to determine their major choice, it was determined that Communication Studies was the most commonly chosen major by these previously undecided students. It was determined that students had many influences in choosing Communication Studies as their academic major. Two students were influenced by a female relative, while the other two students did not feel influenced by any family member. Two students reported ruling out other majors first. Two students used Career Services to help them narrow their options and educate them on the majors. Advisors or professors influenced three students' decision to remain in the communication studies program. The best attribute of the major was determined to be the various options available by three students. Two students mentioned greatly enjoying the courses and the enthusiasm of the professors.

Many similarities and differences were found between the four participating students. All students reported that they had some freedom in their decision-making. All students mentioned being required to take English and math in high school, with English being the favorite required class for three students. Again, two students mentioned liking the teachers in their favorite classes. All students reported taking a fine arts class. All students participated in extracurricular activities that they enjoyed with three students reporting that they had participated in a performance activity. Students mentioned course selection as the primary reason for meeting with a guidance counselor. Little was remembered about taking interest/abilities inventories and the ACT. All students wanted to pursue a career in education at some point of time in high school.

Upon arrival, all students felt they could be academically successful and had no problems meeting friends, reporting that they met their current friends through residence halls. All students determined their academic major between their sophomore and junior year and three students mentioned using Career Services to come to this decision. All four students seemed content with their major, but two students did claim that they may have “settled” in the way that they made their decision. Two students indicated that they had not chosen a career when choosing their academic major. The other two students had chosen a career, but are now uncertain if that career is what they will pursue, because there are so many options open to their academic major.

CHAPTER V

Discussion, Conclusions and Recommendation

This study was designed to determine the most commonly chosen major of previously undecided students, the similarities and differences between these students choosing this major, the main influences in this academic major decision-making process, and the existence of a confirmed career choice upon choosing this academic major. The chapter summarizes the key findings and compares those to previous research. It will also include conclusions, implications, and ideas for future research.

In order to contextualize this study, it must be noted that results proved that from a list of undecided students (freshmen) enrolled at Eastern Illinois University in Fall 2006 compared to a list of Fall 2008 students, Communication Studies was the academic major most commonly selected. However, in this study two other majors, Family and Consumer Sciences and Elementary Education had slightly fewer previously undecided students select them. Previous research studies did not attempt to identify the specific academic major selection of students who had been identified as undecided.

Participants in this research study were asked questions regarding their academic major selection process and decision, specifically requesting information about what or who influenced them in their academic major decision-making process. Feminine influence seemed to be a common theme in this research study as it has been in previous research studies. Horsman (1996) found that mothers and stepmothers often influence the choice of academic major. The current study did find that one participant specifically mentioned her mother as the biggest influence in her academic major selection. This participant only gave her mother credit as an influence because she had performed all of

the academic major research and provided her with this material to decide for herself. On the contrary, two students mentioned no family influence at all in their academic major selection process.

Department advisors and professors often provide students with the best insight into a particular academic major and have been found to greatly influence a student's decision to pursue an academic major (Corley, 1991). Three students mentioned advisors or professors as direct influences of their choice of academic major, as well as the reason that they continue in this academic major program. Participants in the current study specifically reported, "The teachers, more than anything, influenced my decision" and "It was mainly the professors that kept me there." Wilson, Gaff, Dienst, Wood, & Bavry (1975) had similar results as they found that faculty interested students in their field, which was supported by another participant's response, "They really engaged me in learning."

Many past research studies have found that society may influence students to pursue specific academic majors or fields for various reasons (Davies et al, 1997; Simpson, 2003; Dawson-Threat et al., 1996). Specifically Simpson (2003) found that men are more likely to select science-based majors, where women will select more service-based majors. This is often explained through society influence in pushing the female to be more nurturing and service-focused. In the current study, only one student mentioned socialization as a small factor contributing to her decision-making process, stating, "By socialization, you kind of follow a path."

Even though career choice is a question of its own merit, it is often used as a factor contributing to the choice of an academic major. Students will often choose a

major determined to be pre-professional or vocationally-oriented, meaning that they are choosing a major which will prepare them for a specific career (Peterson, 2006). For the purpose of this study, it is interesting to note that students flocked more towards the Communication Studies major, which was non-specific with regard to career. Two participants greatly supported this idea as they said the best thing about the academic major of Communication Studies was the various things that they could do with it. Specifically one participant stated, "You can do a lot in the field of communication," while another student commented, "It just opens the door to multiple different kinds of jobs."

Participants were asked if they took into consideration the fees associated with particular majors compared to what the monetary benefits would be upon completing this major and continuing into the appropriate career. All four participants did not take into account fees comparative to future payouts (salary) when selecting their academic major. In a previous study, Davies & Guppy (1997) had found that women, specifically, did not put emphasis on money when making decisions regarding major and careers choice. Since all participants in this study were women, this supports previous research.

Corley (1991) found that students were influenced to choose an academic major by their interest in the subject matter. When speaking of their experiences with the courses and course content of the Communication Studies major, three students made reference to the classes being enjoyable. This can partially be attributed to the professor and the connection the student had with their professor. One participant responded, "The classes are fun. It's thinking outside of societal norms." Similarly, two students knew upon arrival that they wanted to pursue this academic major, but were uncertain of the

concentration that they wanted to take within the department. Leppel (2001) supports this idea with her findings that students will choose these non-pre-professional majors usually because they are genuinely interested in the courses and subject matter and not for a career.

In order to make an academic major decision, students need to know what options are available to them. Marketing strategies will often influence students' choice on academic major through brochures, undergraduate catalogs, and the school website (Corley, 1991; Beggs et al., 2008; & Peterson, 2006). One participant admitted to utilizing academic major information from Eastern Illinois University's website to make this decision as she noted that her mom gathered all the information and gave it to her to make the final decision.

Undecided students have presented a challenge to educators and administrators in higher education for many years. In order to provide appropriate assistance, there needs to be a better understanding of the undecided student. Previous research has shown that undecided students, with regard to academic major, are best helped by informative counseling sessions which do require great time commitments (Heppner et al., 1995). Two participants specifically mentioned receiving counseling from a Career Services advisor and mentioned how helpful it was to just receive overall information about each concentration within the major. One participant summarized her experience, "I wanted to go into communications, so she (advisor) kind of broke it down for me."

A lack of information has been found to contribute to a student's lack of an academic major decision. Gordon (1995) found that the lack of information about undecided students themselves, academic areas and career choices, were all possible

influences in the academic major selection process. After having selected an academic major, one participant noted, "I was really confused for awhile about what career went with it (academic major)."

Determining why a student may be undecided with regard to academic major could lead a researcher to ask a multitude of questions. Past research found that students' decision-making confidence might be relative to the supportiveness of relationships that students have had. Guay et al. (2003) found that students were more likely to make confident decisions if parents and peers were supportive of their choices. In this research study, participants were asked whether they were encouraged to make their own decisions or if others made decisions for them. All participants recognized that their parents had contributed to most decisions made during the high school years. One of the current study participants commented, "My parents would push for things and guide me, but in the end I got to ultimately decide." Specifically with regard to academic major, one student stated, "No one ever told me necessarily to take this as my major, but when I told them that's what I was pursuing, they were supportive."

As Communication Studies is an academic major, which is not directly related to a single career path, it was concluded that two of the study participants had specifically chosen this major due to the great amount of opportunities available as a career. This was supported by one participants comment, "You can do a lot in the field of Communication." As Gordon (1995) claimed that one of the students' biggest fears is deciding which is most important, a career or academic major, the choice to pursue an academic major where careers vary would seem to make great sense. It is interesting to note that the other two students had chosen a career upon selecting their academic major,

but have since decided to look at other career options within the Communication Studies major.

Gordon (1995) emphasized the diversity of undecided students and claimed that their needs would then vary greatly and be difficult to address. In the current study, participants were asked a variety of questions and some similarities were found among the Communication Studies majors who had once been declared undecided with regard to major. Participants were asked about specific career aspirations while still enrolled in high school and all four students overwhelmingly responded that they were at one point of time seriously considering a career in education. Since all participants were female, this would support findings of Tang et al. (2008) making note that high school females were more interested in helping careers versus males. In addition, it is important to note that two students reported that education could definitely be considered the occupation that was the favorite in the family. This may support the concept that family may encourage certain career choices (Simpson, 2003).

A student's values, such as to help needy families, could influence a student's career choice (Judge et al., 1992). It may be assumed that this could also apply to a student's choice of extracurricular activities, as two students recalled choosing to participate in National Honor Society in high school, because they enjoyed the charity work, which would be in line with the values of work they were hoping to pursue as educators.

Most interestingly, three students mentioned participating in extracurricular activities, such as poms, cheerleading, musicals or show choir: which could all be considered performance groups. Specifically one student even stated that she liked "the

performance aspect.” In retrospect, students may have been able to be helped with academic-major selection sooner if their past interests had been determined sooner. Additionally, it is important to note that three students also mentioned that English had been their favorite required course in high school, because the emphasis on writing is their biggest enjoyment. Also, three students recalled taking art classes as their primary electives specifically remembering how they excelled in these courses. With both art, performance, and writing being large components in the Communication Studies major, high school participation in these types of classes and activities may be a strong influence in helping students determine the appropriate academic major.

As this study took a retrospective approach to determining the academic and career decision-making process of previously undecided students, participants were able to share many experiences from high school and college that may contribute to a better understanding of how to provide for and educate these undecided students of their options in academic major. Within higher education, one of the key issues is retention. As Graunke et al. (2005) emphasized the importance of providing students with positive experiences in college in order to ensure their educational pursuit and decrease the chance of drop out. Students are more likely to have positive experiences if they feel a connection to a specific academic department. The more information and assistance that educators and administrators can provide for undecided students to encourage a specific academic major pursuit, the better off higher education will be.

Conclusion

When creating and implementing this qualitative research study, the researcher was interested in exploring the academic major outcome of previously undecided

students and the influences contributing to this decision. In this study, the previously undecided students had generally chosen academic majors which were not vocationally-oriented or pre-professional. After comparing two spreadsheets of students at Eastern Illinois University from Fall 2006 and Fall 2008, it was determined that Communication Studies was the most commonly chosen academic major. All students who had been undecided freshmen in Fall 2006 and were declared to be Communication Studies majors by Fall 2008 were recruited for participation with the first five students actively participating in the qualitative research design.

Participants were given a questionnaire and were audio-recorded in a one-on-one, face-to-face interview to gather results. Results supported the idea that undecided students would choose an academic major with various career opportunities as two students specified choosing Communication Studies for its many options for job opportunities, while the other did not originally choose it for this sake, but did also mention enjoying this aspect of the major. In addition, many themes arose and were supported by existing research in determining what influenced the academic major selection of students. Two students recognized influence by a family member, and three students mentioned the importance of faculty involvement and interaction in influencing their academic major selection. Two students specifically named their career advisor or academic advisor as assisting them in this decision. Three students were interested in Communication Studies because of the variety of careers available, while another student mentioned the classes as being the best thing about the major. All students seemed to have a general interest in the program or subject matter.

These previously undecided students having selected Communication Studies were also asked a variety of questions to determine if there were similarities and differences among the participants. Some very distinct similarities were found that could potentially lead to future research in deciding if these findings could aid guidance counselors or career advisors in assisting undecided students with their academic major selection process. Some of these findings include:

- All four students had mentioned dual influence between themselves and their parents in their academic major decision-making process
- Three students agreed that English was their favorite required course in high school
- Three students participated in performance organizations in high school
- All students remembered wanting to pursue careers in education while in high school
- All students recalled meeting their current friends through residence hall living arrangements
- Three students had mentioned Career Services as influential in their academic major decision-making process
- All students reported money (fees or salary) had not influenced their decision on their academic major

Where undecided students have always been considered an eclectic population of students, it would seem that these students might be more similar than previously thought.

Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to determine the academic major selection of previously undecided students. These students were asked to identify their decision-making process in choosing this academic major and collected data was compared to previous research. Students were asked questions to determine if there were similarities in the influences that contributed to their academic major choice. With all research studies, limitations existed. The following recommendations are suggested to future researchers:

1. A quantitative study, based on the results of this study, to enable the collection of data from a larger, more diverse undergraduate population of undecided students
2. An extension of this research using students from the top 5 most commonly selected academic majors to allow for a comparison of similarities and differences among students selecting these different academic majors.
3. A qualitative study designed for students who are still undecided with regard to academic major to determine the differences between students before and after they have chosen their academic major.
4. A longitudinal study tracking these students' career paths over five years could provide useful information for career counselors.

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APPENDIX A

Eastern Illinois University Undergraduate Majors

Undergraduate Majors offered at Eastern Illinois University

1. Accounting
2. African-American Studies
3. Art
4. Biological Sciences
5. Career and Organizational Studies
6. Career and Technical Education
7. Chemistry
8. Clinical Laboratory Science
9. Communication Disorders and Sciences
10. Communication Studies
11. Early Childhood Education
12. Economics
13. Elementary Education
14. English
15. Family and Consumer Sciences
16. Finance
17. Foreign Languages
18. General Studies
19. Geography
20. Geology
21. Health Studies
22. History
23. Industrial Technology
24. Journalism
25. Management
26. Management Information Systems
27. Marketing
28. Mathematics
29. Mathematics and Computer Science
30. Middle Level Education
31. Music
32. Nursing RN to BS
33. Philosophy
34. Physical Education
35. Physics
36. Political Science
37. Pre-Engineering
38. Psychology
39. Recreation Administration
40. Science w/Teacher Certification
41. Social Science Studies
42. Sociology
43. Special Education
44. Theatre Arts

****Any Pre-(Health) Majors must also designate another major**

APPENDIX B**Major Distribution List of Previously Undecided Students (Fall 2008)**

Major Distribution List of Previously Undecided Students (Fall 2008)

Accounting	7
African American Studies	2
Art	4
Biological Sciences	31
Career and Technical Education	5
Chemistry	3
Clinical Laboratory Sciences	1
Communication Studies	59
Communication Disorders & Sciences	11
Early Childhood Education	11
Economics	1
Elementary Education	49
English	11
Family and Consumer Sciences	58
Finance	9
Foreign Languages	2
Geography	12
Health Studies	11
History	9
Industrial Technology	21
Journalism	9
Management	25
Management Information Systems (MIS)	1
Marketing	15
Mathematics	2
Mathematics & Computer Science	1
Music	5
Philosophy	4
Physical Education	43
Physics	1
Political Science	7
Pre-Pharmacy	1
Psychology	33
Recreation Administration	15
Social Science Studies	5
Sociology	28
Special Education	6
Undecided	18
Total 2006	788
Total 2008	536

APPENDIX C

Initial Email to Potential Participants

(Email to students requesting participation)

I am a graduate student at EIU and am currently doing research on students who enroll at EIU as a freshman without identifying a major of study. You, along with many other EIU students, have been selected to participate in this study. If you agree to participate and complete all parts of the process, you will receive a Wal-Mart gift card for your assistance. Participation will only take one to two hours of your time all together and can easily be worked around your schedule.

The primary purpose of this study is to learn about how previously undecided student decide on a major and what may influence this decision for a specified major.

Your participation would include:

1. Completion of Informed Consent Request Form
2. Completion of Demographics Questions
3. Participation in a one-hour, one-on-one interview with the researcher

The one-on-one, one-hour interview will be set around your schedule and will take place in a 4th Floor Study Room in Booth Library. The session will be audio recorded to be transcribed later to ensure that everything will be quoted accurately. All information will be considered confidential and will only be heard and viewed by the researcher. If you say anything that could identify you, the researcher will characterize it differently to ensure anonymity. You will be asked to share about various parts of your life and decision making process.

Information gathered will be drawn from questions about:

1. Demographics
2. High school education, extra-curricular activities, and leadership positions
3. Family
4. Family education/careers
5. Resources utilized in academic major decision making process
6. Influences on your decision
7. College adjustment
8. Academic major selection
9. Academic major decision making process
10. Career decision

If you would like to participate or have questions, please email at cdthompson@eiu.edu. The first six respondents will be accepted for this study, so if you are interested please respond as soon as you can.

Thank you again!

Sincerely,

Christina Thompson

Graduate Student – College Student Affairs Graduate Program
Eastern Illinois University

APPENDIX D

Follow-Up Email to Participants

Dear (Participant),

I would greatly appreciate your help with my graduate research. I am looking to schedule your interview the week of March 23-27th. Please let me know what days and times work best for you for that week. As soon as I get your availability, I will go ahead and schedule the interview so that I can make appropriate arrangements. Upon completion of your interview, you will receive your Wal-Mart gift card. Thank you again for agreeing to participate and I look forward to hearing back from you.

Thanks again,

Christina Thompson

EIU Graduate Student

APPENDIX E

Informed Consent Form

Informed Consent

Factors Influencing the Major Selection of Previously Undecided Students: A Phenomenological Study

This study will involve students who as freshmen were identified as undecided as they had not specified a major in college. The main purpose of this study is to discover what majors were most likely to be chosen by these previously undecided students and what factors contributed to this choice. Through studying previous research, a list of demographic questions and more explicit interview questions have been compiled. The topics that will be discussed include 1) Demographic Information, 2) Family Involvement, 3) Resources Available, 4) High School Education/Demographics, 5) Family Education/Career, and 6) Major Knowledge/Other Influences.

Data will be gathered by audio-recorded one-on-one, one hour interviews between the participant and the researcher. Any data collected and printed will be done so without using names. If a quote is made, a pseudonym will be used to protect the participant's identity. All information will be transcribed to ensure that the participants are not misquoted. Any demographic questions that may identify the individual will be grouped into categories where specifics are not used. To ensure anonymity, the researcher will be the only individual with access to the audio recordings and any other identifying information. All information will be kept securely in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's home for a minimum of three years beyond the conclusion of the study.

Beyond the one hour interview, the only other contact that will be made with the participant is the emailing of the completed transcription for the participant to review. If the participants are comfortable with the accuracy of the transcription, they will not need to respond and this will conclude their participation in the study. If they disagree with any part of the transcription, alterations will be made. Upon each participant's completion of the study, at this time, all participants will receive the promised incentive, a Wal-Mart gift card.

By participating in this research, the student will be contributing to the collection of data that may be useful for academic professionals interested in understanding the decision-making process of undecided students. This will allow professionals to better assist undecided students with their developmental needs. More directly, subjects may benefit by being provided the results of the study upon completion of the research. Reading the results may increase their understanding of the process that they have just conquered by deciding upon the designated major.

It is possible that participants may recount some upsetting situations during the interview process, but due to the subject matter, it is highly unlikely that any information shared will cause any harm to the student, so the risks are extremely minimal. Nothing about the study will cause any legal, physical or social harm to the student. If at any time during the research, the participant feels uncomfortable, they have the right to withdraw from the study.

In signing this form, I:

- _____ 1) agree to participate in all aspects of this study voluntarily;
- _____ 2) am aware of and agree to the audio-recording of all interviews;
- _____ 3) recognize that I have the right to withdraw from this study at any time;
- _____ 4) am giving my permission to use any quotations without attribution.

Thank you again for agreeing to participate in this thesis research.

Participant

Date

Researcher

Date

If you have any questions for the researcher, feel free to contact: Christina Thompson by phone at 217-581-8587 or by email at cdthompson@eiu.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns about the treatment of human participants in this study, you may call or write: Institutional Review Board, Eastern Illinois University, 600 Lincoln Ave., Charleston, IL 61920, Telephone: (217) 581-8576, E-Mail: eiuirb@www.eiu.edu.

APPENDIX F**Demographic Questionnaire/Survey**

DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONS**General**

Name:

Age:

Gender: M F

Ethnicity: White/Non-Hispanic

Hispanic/Latino

Asian/Pacific Islander

Black/Non-Hispanic

American Indian/Alaskan Native

Other (Please Specify) _____

Education

Name of High School:

Number of students in graduating class:

Was there a guidance counselor in your school?

How often did you meet with the guidance counselor?

Family

How many siblings do you have?

Where do you fall (oldest, middle, youngest)?

Did you live with both parents during high school?

If not, who did you live with?

Family Education

What is the highest degree earned by your mother?

What is your mother's occupation?

What is the highest degree earned by your father?

What is your father's occupation?

APPENDIX G

Interview Protocol

Interview Questions

Name:

Family

1. Was there a family member who influenced your choice of major?
 - If so,
 - a. Who?
 - b. How or why?
2. Were you encouraged to make your own decisions or do others make decisions for you?
 - a. Why?
3. Is there one occupation that is a favorite in your family?
 - a. Explain.

High School

1. What required classes did you take in high school?
 - a. Did you enjoy any of these particularly well?
 - b. Why do you think this was?
2. What elective classes did you take in high school?
 - a. Why did you choose these specific classes over others?
3. What extra-curricular activities did you participate in during high school (sports included)?
 - a. Within these extracurricular activities, did you serve in any leadership positions? What?
 - b. What about these activities did you enjoy?
4. When you met with a guidance counselor in high school, what did you talk about or do?
5. Did you take any interest/abilities inventories in high school or upon arrival at EIU?
 - a. If so, which ones?
 - b. Do you remember what suggestions were made by this? If so, explain.

6. Did you have specific career aspirations in high school at any given point?
 - a. What were some of these ideas?
 - b. Why were you interested in these?

College

1. When taking the ACT or SAT, did you mark that you were interested in certain academic majors?
 - a. What majors and why?
2. Did you feel you could be successful academically at college when you first arrived?
 - a. Why or why not?
3. Please explain how easy it was to meet new people when arriving on campus?
 - a. How did you meet your current friends?

Major/Career

1. At what point did you decide on your current major?
 - a. How much time did you have left in college?
2. Can you describe how you came to this decision?
 - a. What type of process did you use?
 - b. Did you use any resources on EIU's campus (Career Services, Academic Advising, Academic Departments)
3. Did you feel like you "settled" on your academic major?
 - a. Explain.
4. What or who would you say influenced you the most in choosing this major?
 - a. How?
 - b. Did you take into consideration the amount of fees associated with this major when choosing?
5. What do you like best about your major?

6. Upon choosing a major, did you also predetermine what career you would like to pursue?
 - a. If so, what is it that you hope to become?

APPENDIX H

IRB Approval

Christina Thompson, Counseling and Student Development

Thank you for submitting the research protocol titled, "Factors Influencing the Major Selection of Previously Undecided Students: A Phenomenological Study" for review by the Eastern Illinois University Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB has Approved this research protocol following an Expedited Review procedure. IRB review has determined that the protocol involves no more than minimal risk to subjects and satisfies all of the criteria for approval of research.

This protocol has been given the IRB number 09-004. You may proceed with this study from 1/27/2009 to 1/26/2010. You must submit Form E, Continuation Request, to the IRB by 12/26/2009 if you wish to continue the project beyond the approval expiration date.

This approval is valid only for the research activities, timeline, and subjects described in the above named protocol. IRB policy requires that any changes to this protocol be reported to, and approved by, the IRB before being implemented. You are also required to inform the IRB immediately of any problems encountered that could adversely affect the health or welfare of the subjects in this study. Please contact me, or the Compliance Coordinator at 581-8576, in the event of an emergency. All correspondence should be sent to:

Institutional Review Board

c/o Office of Research and Sponsored Programs

Telephone: 581-8576

Fax: 217-581-7181

Email: eiuirb@www.eiu.edu

Upon completion of your research project, please submit Form G, Completion of Research Activities, to the IRB, c/o the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs.

Thank you for your assistance, and the best of success with your research.

John Best, Chairperson

Institutional Review Board

Telephone: 581-6412

Email: jbbest@eiu.edu